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## THE STUDY OF ENGLISH COMPOSITION AS A MEANS TO FULLER LIVING

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The question whether the art of writing is a thing that can be taught, and whether a course in English composition ought to be made compulsory to the college Freshman, has been much discussed, and to that discussion I can add nothing of value, unless the experience upon which my own convictions are founded may be so regarded. In each of my three years of teaching this subject in a coeducational college I have seen the great number of my students come out at the end of the year masters of at least fairly clear and effective English, and prepared to meet any ordinary need of expression likely to arise in their lives, while a few of them really wrote exceptionally well. That this was the effect of continued and enforced effort and not merely a natural gift self-developed is, it seems to me, clearly enough borne out by the fact that fewer than a third of these students when they entered college could write a page of which they had any well-founded reason to be proud.

This end, then, is achieved: the student, in most cases, acquires skill in the use of the language. In my Freshman year of teaching I thought this the only aim of my work; by the next year I had begun to wonder if something more were not accomplished, and this wonder grew to a deep conviction that not only was there something more accomplished, but that that thing, which was a growth in the life of the student, was far greater than the mere mastery of the fundamentals of the language. Finally I went to the students themselves to hear what they had to say about it. Stirred to an indignant curiosity by the vigorous denunciation of compulsory composition in colleges by a learned professor of English, one day in the first semester I asked my fifty-eight Freshmen to hand in unsigned answers to three questions, which

were as follows: (1) Would you have taken English composition if you had not been compelled to do so? (2) Would you take it the second semester if you were not compelled to do so? (3) In either case, why?

Of the fifty-eight, eighteen, or 31 per cent, answered no to the first question. The two of these who answered the second question in the negative gave temperamental dislike as the reason. Of the sixteen who answered the second question affirmatively, fourteen gave other reasons than a desire to be able to write; while of the forty who answered both questions in the affirmative, twenty-four gave as reasons for desiring to remain in the course some interest other than a utilitarian one. These answers were somewhat varied, but their general trend was the same. Nearly two-thirds of these Freshmen, many of whom had entered the course unwillingly, realized before the end of the first semester that their lives had grown in some way broader and fuller than they had been before. They could not in all cases analyze their gain; but they were conscious that they had found an unexpected interest in the study.

The Freshman usually comes to the writing of themes with more or less dread; and in this dread his first experience confirms him, for he can think of nothing to say and he is ashamed of his effort to express himself. The sort of writing he has been doing is not creditable. He racks his memory for material and he brings up the obvious, the sensational, or the trite. The account of his travels does not please, his hairbreadth escape fails to excite admiration, and even to his own ears his high-flown sentiments and unreasoned opinions sound crude and insincere when they come from under the instructor's pencil. But as the weeks go on, with their painful process of elimination, he works slowly down to the realization of that which is worth while in himself—his own frank point of view; those things in his experience that have not merely a personal but a universal interest and significance; his own ability to see things that are vital about him. His opinions become of value to others because he first makes them of value to himself. He learns what part of him is genuine and cultivates it, if only because he is obliged to give it forth. And the knowledge that,

in a modest way, he has after all something that is really worth giving to other people reacts upon his own life and leads him to a fuller understanding of its significance.

The Freshman is usually only half-conscious of all this; but it sometimes happens that he gains such an outlook on the things he has lived as to give him actually a new grip upon himself and his life. This happened in the case of one young man who came to my college after a boyhood of unusually sharp suffering and temptation, chiefly the result of a lack of wise guidance. He was exceedingly reticent when he came; he had little to say of himself, off paper or on it. He very naturally shrank from telling his own life-story, and he had not learned to apply any standard of criticism to the past or the present. He had simply lived—lived indomitably and in fuller measure than his years bespoke, but in bitter rebellion.

He had nothing to write on the ordinary assignments that was interesting or worth reading. But after awhile he began to give me short themes, the poignant force of whose narrative was painful. Although they were rarely told in the first person their origin could not be doubted; and while there was not a line of exposition in them, their point was unmistakable. Every one of them showed in some peculiar way a boy's need of guidance before the temptation that takes him unawares, and his intense longing to be understood. Gradually, as he worked over his own past life, he came to a clearer understanding of its significance; it settled into its place in his big scheme and he took it up again calmly and as a thing out of which at least some strength and some help to others might be plucked. Incidentally it took him nine months to learn to spell, and to master the fundamentals of English grammar, which had never been taught him in the secondary school. By the end of this time he was producing the best themes in his class. But who shall say these latter things were his greatest accomplishment?

Nor is it alone in the discovery of himself that the Freshman grows. He very palpably adds to his own life from without as he struggles for something to say. It may be that when he comes he has already the "eye for copy," but the chances are that he has not. Wildly then he looks about him for the thing that has never

before been worth seeing. He must have an incident; he has seen nothing happening! He essays to write a description; he has no standard for selection. There is everything about him to be seen, but he comes face to face with the fact that he never has seen his environment save as a blur. He has been missing three-fourths of what has been existing and going on in his world.

How determined, how frantic, is his search for material, his manuscript bears evidence. He writes the story of how, after a long hunt on opening day, he was finally steered into his classroom by an obliging Senior; he tells how he saw a beautiful little girl lead her father to a street vender that he might purchase her a toy balloon; or he gives a detailed account of his fraternity spike. He describes his neighbor's yard with painful minuteness, and presents to us one or another of the buildings of his college in the guise of a mediaeval castle. And he shares his instructor's dissatisfaction with what he has presented. As the days go on and one theme after another is criticized and perhaps rejected, he grows desperate; his quest of the interesting becomes an obsession. He is greedy for occurrences; he cannot see anything that stands out strongly or definitely to eye or ear without speculating on its possible usefulness as material for a theme. Then by slow process he learns to apply the standards of real interest to what he sees; to select from the commonplace scene the one vivid spot of color, the bit of life, the corner that tells a story; he learns to separate the event that is vital, however slight, from the sensational and the flat. He catches the flash of anger on the face in the street, the play of light and hum of voices in the crowded hall, the sweep of the wind across snow-heaped fields. He has been only half-conscious of the beauty, the interest, the vividness in which he has lived. Now it becomes a part of him.

This is at first a forced appreciation; he hunts for material because he is compelled, and often unwillingly. But he is developing a power of seeing and hearing things that he never loses, and when he is no longer compelled to watch and listen he will continue to do so just as he continues to read stories.

It is this newly awakened power of observing that the Freshman realizes most concretely in his gains. A breezy little Freshman girl wrote last year:

My friends laugh at me because I see beauty in the blue-black shading of a stain of coal-dust on snow; they grow impatient when I stop on a stormy day to see the big trees strain in the wind, or refuse to leave off watching the children in the neighboring schoolyard to eat my dinner. I think I *am* rather extreme—I think very likely I am foolish about it. But I've come into a new world, and I can't stop looking at it. Perhaps I shall get over it when I have finished writing Freshman themes, but somehow I rather hope I shall not.

No doubt this is an exaggerated case; this peculiar appreciation of beauty is not always the reward of the attempt to write and it is in all probability largely temperamental. And yet this girl had never "seen things" before—it was a "new world" to her.

In sympathetic understanding of others, too, the Freshman grows because he must write. He learns to interpret as well as to observe. He reads the dull pathos in the face of the street-cleaner, the ecstasy in that of the child; he watches the man selecting a postcard, the girl reading the letter from home, the boy smoking his first pipe, and he understands it all; he understands the lives of the people he meets by projecting himself into them. At first all of this is done crudely and baldly enough; but the more practiced in writing he grows, the less consciously and the more naturally and naïvely he lives in the people about him. He becomes in some degree a social being.

There is a most important purely intellectual gain to the student in the power of abstract thinking which comes from the analyzing and correlating of facts. This is more commonly recognized as a direct end of the study of English composition than any of the others discussed. But I believe that it takes only equal rank with the others in the development of character.

Four things, then, the Freshman learns from his enforced study of composition: he becomes acquainted with himself and learns to measure the breadth and the value of his own life; he adds to his life the beauty and the interest of his environment, much of which he has never definitely seen before; he grows in his understanding of other people, and consequently in his ultimate power to play his part in the social organization; and he becomes a more efficient intellectual machine.

Of course no one, not even the most enthusiastic of teachers, could believe that every Freshman whose unwilling feet are set

in the ways of English composition progresses appreciably in all of these directions. There are many who struggle hard and untiringly and attain at the utmost merely a fairly correct expression—they can go no farther; and there are unfortunately many more who, as the learned professor has asserted, absorb as little as is possible of the instruction under which they sit, obtain their credit with as little effort as may be—or fail to obtain it—and triumph over the authorities who would suborn their wills and seek to subjugate them in their heaven-bestowed right of free and individual expression. But from the testimony of the Freshmen themselves and from the actual results shown in their work the conclusion is very well justified that the student of writing who does not in the course of his study, if that study is rightly guided, become a happier, bigger, and more socially efficient being is the student who, unless he is subnormal in intellect, deliberately sets himself against progress.

Here then is one large justification for making this course compulsory. The Freshman does not know the real nature of the work he is undertaking. He associates it with the writing of many themes, and for this he has a dread inspired by the very narrowness out of which the work must train him. In the course of time he finds that writing means simply living and expressing life; and while life is a thing of stern endeavor it is a joyous thing and well worth having. And, after all, the gift of life is thrust upon us.